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President Discussed Libya Cables With Billy

No Recollection Of Giving Copies

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The White House acknowledged yesterday that President Carter discussed "low-classification" State Department cables with his brother, Billy, concerning Billy Carter's first trip to Libya in September 1978.

A White House spokesman said, however, that the president "does not now recall" having shown his brother the cables or having given him copies of them.

The president's latest disclosure in the controversy about his brother's ties to Libya was prompted by revelations earlier in the day on Capitol Hill at a meeting of the House Judiciary Committee.

Justice Department records turned over to the committee Tuesday, committee members said, showed that Billy Carter told government investigators last winter that he had copies of State Department cable traffic about his Libyan trips and that "Jimmy gave them to me."

Voicing sharp dismay about the contents of that interview, conducted last Jan. 16 at Billy Carter's Buena Vista, Ga., home, the Judiciary Committee quickly demanded a formal explanation from the president as it approved a resolution of inquiry into Billy Carter's activities.

Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.) said the resolution could not come up on the House floor before Aug. 19, after the Democratic National Convention.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department took back the documents, drawing protests from both Democratic and Republican committee members.

In its initial response to the new furor, the White House issued a statement that deputy press secretary Ray Jenkins read to reporters yesterday afternoon.

"The president's best recollection," the statement said, "is that the only State Department cables he has ever discussed with Billy Carter are low classification cables from our embassy in Libya reporting on Billy Carter's first trip to Libya in September of 1978 and indicating that the trip had gone well from the embassy's point of view."

"The president does not now recall whether he saw the texts of these cables himself or heard about them from others. He does not now recall showing the texts to Billy Carter or giving him copies."

Jenkins said the cables were probably classified "confidential" or "limited use only," which are relatively low rankings in the government's classification system. Jenkins also said it was his "impression" that the president had discussed these cables with Billy Carter shortly after the president's brother returned from his September 1978 trip.

Rep. Harold S. Sawyer (R-Mich.) disclosed Billy Carter's account in the course of committee debate on the resolution of inquiry, which could trigger a second congressional investigation of Billy Carter's Libyan connections and the administration's handling of them. The Senate has already formed a special subcommittee to look into the matter.

Sawyer said an FBI report on the Jan. 16 interview with the president's brother showed that Billy Carter "said he had been furnished all State Department cable traffic vis-a-vis Libya and that he had them at his house."

Beyond that, Sawyer recounted, "he [Billy Carter] said he received them from the president of the United States."

Sawyer said later that he did not recall whether Billy Carter pinpointed any particular trip or date for his claims. But the president's brother did tell his interrogators that "Jimmy gave them to me," Sawyer told reporters during a break.

"I'm precisely sure of what I'm saying," Sawyer added. "I'm a trial lawyer. I read documents very carefully."

Justice Department officials took

their four volumes of documents back from the committee Tuesday evening, apparently with no intention of releasing them again until the full House acts on the resolution of inquiry. But several other committee members who had a chance to inspect the records before they were withdrawn corroborated Sawyer's account.

"Either it's a gross violation of the communications statute by the president or Billy Carter is guilty of a felony" in lying to government investigators, Sawyer contended at one point. He said later that he assumed the cables were classified.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he [Billy Carter] furnished them to the Libyan government," Sawyer told reporters. He said the FBI report on the interview showed that the president's brother mentioned the cable traffic in support of a claim that his visits to Libya had been "good for the United States."

Sawyer said the Justice Department records showed that Billy Carter had not been telling the truth in the Jan. 16 interview, when he was asked how much he had been paid by the Libyans.

At that point, he had been paid \$20,000 by the Libyans, by a check that Randy Coleman, an associate of Billy Carter, had picked up in Washington on Dec. 27, according to sources. But in the Jan. 16 interview, Sawyer said, the president's brother said he had received "only a few gold bracelets" and reimbursement of some \$6,000 to \$7,000 in expenses he said he incurred while escorting a Libyan delegation on a 1979 trip to the United States.

Justice Department officials evidently chose to ignore the inconsistencies. One department lawyer who worked on the case also said he was not aware of any follow-up effort to check out Billy Carter's claims of having been given the State Department cable traffic by the president.

Joel Lisker, the head of the Justice Department's foreign agents registration unit, and an FBI agent who accompanied Lisker, simply felt that it was another of Billy Carter's "irresponsible statements," this source said.

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